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ABSTRACT

One professor's motives in organizing writing workshops with panels of faculty members talking in their fields about writing issues were both political and philosophical. As director of the writing center at the Claremont Graduate School, in 1993 she feared that with latest round of budget cuts the writing center was in danger of elimination. Concern was growing that too many professors were perceiving the writing center as only a remedial and editing service. To remove the stigma of remediation from the center a sense of "a community of writers" among the professors and students was created. Professors were encouraged to promote the center to their students, all kinds of students, not just the weakest ones. Out of discussions with professors and administrators came the idea of "Talking about Writing Workshops," where 3 or 4 faculty members would speak to students in their discipline about what they do when they write and what they look for in student writing. A synthesis of what professors have said at these workshops shows a consensus among professors from all disciplines. Their advice is strikingly similar to Maxine Hairston's definition of good writing: "Good writing is writing that succeeds in saying something worthwhile to a specific audience for some purpose." These writing workshops have not only helped the writing center politically; they have also assured its tutors that they know what they are doing, that they can effectively tutor a student in economics and other fields. (TB)

# ENGAGING THE FACULTY: A SUCCESSFUL STRATEGY

Lissa Petersen, Director
The Claremont Graduate School Writing Center





As Writing Center staff members, we need to keep the focus on our main job: to help students become better writers by talking to them about their writing. So why offer writing workshops with faculty members? And what can we learn from them?

Stephen North in his well-known 1984 article, "The Idea of a Writing Center," defined all such efforts as having about them "an air of shrewdness, or desperation, the trace of a survival instinct at work" (446). These terms aptly describe my state of mind in early 1993 when, as Writing Center Director at The Claremont Graduate School (CGS), I began organizing writing workshops with panels of faculty members talking to students in their fields about writing issues. My motives were both political and philosophical.

The most immediate was purely political. The Writing Center had been formed in the fall of1985, disbanded in the fall of 1986 in a general round of budget cuts, and reinstated in 1990. In the spring of 1993, the center was again in danger of elimination. This crisis as well as some earlier discussions I had been having with supportive faculty members were what prompted me to try these workshops. They may have had some effect on the faculty, which voted unanimously to support the center with funds deducted from departmental budgets. But I believe the main reason professors voted for the center at a sacrifice to their own programs was because they wanted us to remediate their weak graduate-student writers.

This issue brings me to our philosophical motive. While this problem definitely needed to be addressed by the Center, I was becoming concerned that too many professors were seeing our function as only a remedial and editing service. North's article was written out of the same frustration: "The members of my profession, my colleagues ... do not understand what I do. They do not understand what does happen, what can happen, in a Writing Center"

(433). We saw our mission as inclusive - to give all sorts of writers helpful responses from experienced and highly qualified readers. We believed that any writer - student or professional - benefits from gaining a sense of audience while drafting a paper. But no matter how many times we had sent information to professors and spoken at orientations about the mission of the Writing Center, few seemed to be hearing us. We wanted faculty members to get to know us and our purpose first hand. Our goal was to remove the stigma of remediation from the center by creating the sense of "a community of writers" among professors and students. We also needed professors to promote the center to their students - all kinds of students, not just the weakest ones.

Before we began these workshops, we already had in place several ongoing means of communicating with the faculty. We made presentations to students, with professors present, at departmental orientations each fall. I made annual oral reports at faculty meetings. We sent out semester reports on our activities, student use, and student evaluation responses. We sent letters from the Dean with fliers and bookmarks each fall, reminders at finals time, and notices for our workshops on writing graduate research papers, conference papers, grant proposals... .

In addition to informing faculty members of our activities, we worked with the Dean, who invited selected professors to serve on the Writing Center Advisory Committee, which makes annual recommendations to him on the center's budget and future plans. I also interviewed several professors over the first couple years to determine how we could best meet their needs. And I invited professors from various departments to our staff meetings to talk to us about writing in their disciplines and to answer consultants' questions about writing assignments or issues that surfaced in consulting sessions with students from their departments.

Out of these discussions, particularly with Advisory Committee members, we came up with the idea of Talking about Writing Workshops, where a panel of three or four faculty members would speak to students in their discipline about what they do when they write and what they look for in student writing. Specifically, I sent the professors the following list of questions to discuss at the workshop:

1. When you write, what works for you?
   What process do you use in general?
   What steps do you follow when writing an article in your field?
   What habits get you going?
   What difficulties have you had, and how have you coped with them?

What advice do you have for students to help them with their writing process?

2. What do you look for when you evaluate student papers?
   What are the most common problems in student writing?
   What kinds of writing skills should students master to make successful contributions to this field in the future?

The focus is on the underlying assumption that all of us are writers and that, while we may have different approaches, we confront similar situations and problems when we write. The focus is on the process first. I generally moderate and make arrangements for these sessions; a Writing Center consultant attends as a notetaker.

In the eleven Talking about Writing workshops we have held since 1993, this format has worked. Professors have been willing, often eager, to participate because they enjoy sharing their own writing experiences and they are concerned about the quality of their students' writing. Moreover, they can count this participation as a form of service to the institution, and it involves little preparation. Students have attended - usually in much larger numbers than at our more general workshops - because they want to hear what their professors have to say. Their evaluations have been enthusiastic, and many have started visiting the Writing Center because of these sessions. As for us, we are spreading the word about our mission, getting good publicity, and finding out what professors value in student writing.

What do they value? After sorting through consultants' notes from the Talking about Writing workshops over the past three years, I have synthesized Claremont Graduate School faculty members' responses to the

basic questions on the writing process and on evaluation of student products. While the categories are mine, the quotations and paraphrases are the professors' and reflect their main concerns.

## CGS PROFESSORS' ADVICE ON THE WRITING PROCESS

### In General

- Writing IS thinking.
- Find good models and find out why they are good.
- Look at professional journals in your field, and follow the conventions.
- History professor: "Your body tells you when to write." In the morning with a clear desk and a cup of coffee, perhaps. Set up a routine that works for you.
- Set aside large blocks of time to write.
- "Force yourself to write even if you don't feel like it."
- When a professor offers to read over a first draft before the paper is due, take advantage of the opportunity.
- Set artificial deadlines, especially if you are a procrastinator.
- Education professor's process: spew, organize, write, criticize, revise - again and again.

### Inventing

- Write down ideas all the time. Keep a journal. If you're an oral person, you might tape your ideas. These practices keep you in touch with what you are thinking.
  - Politics and Policy professor:" The first conversation is with yourself. Once it's on paper, it has a life of its own, but you don't know if it will work until it's written down."
- Economics professor: "Research is a big conversation." Don't research and write in isolation. Talk over ideas with your colleagues and make notes.
- The purpose of the literature search is to motivate your own inquiry. Know what you want to say, and focus your search. Engage the literature; don't just summarize it. Ask, "So what?"
- Before drafting, do a "mind dump" first. Then clear the screen and start writing the paper. One professor advises, "Throw away whatever you start out writing. The first stuff is just to get you going."
- Outlining
  - History professor:"Outlining is the thing on which you grow the paper. It enables you to have the paper before you have the paper."
  - It is highly recommended by some professors and used more informally by others. But they caution, "Be flexible." Often your ideas will change as you write. Don't rule out new ideas you discover just because they don't fit the outline.

### Drafting

- Don't research and read too long and start writing too late.

- Write regularly. Begin each day rereading yesterday's work. Be your own devil's advocate. Sometimes real progress is just revising yesterday's writing.
- Anticipate your audience - what it knows and what it needs to know.
- Write the introduction and conclusion last.
- If your topic is well focused, you should be able to tell what the paper is about in one sentence.
- Don't get bogged down in data. Get to your point.
- Use placeholders when you get stuck, and move on.
- Use signposts - transitions, headings, or organizing sentences. Bullets are recommended in some fields; be sure the context and the connections among the points are clear.
- Show respect for positions you criticize.

Revising

- Don't turn in a first draft as a finished paper.
- Set a draft aside for awhile (a day, sometimes a month) so that you revise it with a fresh perspective and see it as a reader would.
- First revise the content; then edit the sentences and words.
- When editing, read your writing aloud. Notice sharp stops. Also watch for sentence breaks, lengths, and rhythms. Finally, edit for elegance - precise and concise wording.
- Share your writing with a constructive, critical reader. You might form a group of fellow writers for this purpose, or use the Writing Center.

## CGS PROFESSORS' RESPONSES TO STUDENT WRITING

### 1. Clear, Strong, Focused Thesis

Advice

- "Be direct." Get to the point early.
  - Economics professor: "Have clarity and conviction. If you know what you want to say, you can say it forcefully in your writing; if not, then no amount of effort devoted to the writing can make it communicate something other than your own confusion."
- Management professor's criteria for judging a paper:
  - clear, strong position
  - comprehensiveness of the literature search
  - quality of the analysis

Problems

- No point, no clear purpose
- "It takes too long to figure out the writer's purpose."
- Topic too broad
- Unclear, undefined terms

### 2. Substance - Originality and Depth of Analysis

Advice

- "Have the courage to put yourself on the line."
- "Don't hide your voice in other people's words."

• Politics and Policy professor: "It's important to introduce the chorus of others' voices, but it's critical to introduce your own voice, even if it's just a note. Voice comes through in how you select priorities, synthesize, and hone your style as well as through direct assertions. Have an original way of seeing and saying something."

Problems

- Lack of originality
- Too much description (summary); too little analysis.
- English professor: overquoting or relying too heavily on what critics say and on plot summaries instead of original analysis.
- Unsupported assertions

3. Organization

Definition: the logical ordering of the arguments with a clear and connected sense of direction

Advice

- Religion/Archaeology professor:
  - Get at the problem right away.
  - Relate it to the larger field.
  - Give the methodology you will use.
  - State your conclusion so that it advances knowledge in the field.

Problems

- Poor organization, illogical argument, disjointedness
- The "information dump" paper
  - Students turn in as final papers first drafts that are unorganized masses of researched material.
- Weak connections
  - "No transitions, so I don't know where the paper's going."

4. Elegant Style

Advice

- Some professors prefer a rich vocabulary; subtle, complex sentences; and lengthy paragraphs. Others ask for "short, straightforward, simple, decisive sentences" with common words in concise paragraphs. These divisions are not necessarily based on academic discipline, though there are more humanities professors in the first category and more Management and Information Science professors in the second.
  - "Minimize jargon," say the psychologists. Some professors hate jargon; others say it's okay if correctly used, with the audience in mind.
  - Politics and Policy professor: "Get rid of all the adverbs."
- Both types, however, agree on the need for a clear, succinct, precise style.
  - Write with active sentences, avoiding passive verbs unless necessary. "They are distancing and more complicated to read."
  - Choose precise words.
  - Be concise: "Short and sweet."

Problems

- Everything is too long!

- A Psychology professor's complaint: "Lots of extra words or sentences that repeat ideas without adding useful information."
- The paper's too long for the assignment.
- Sentences are too long and hard to read.
- Phrases are too wordy.

- "Unreadable academese" and "overblown rhetoric."

5. Acceptable Grammar

"Acceptable" means that it does not impede comprehension or distract the reader. Some professors are more bothered than others by grammatical or mechanical errors.

Problems

These are the ones professors specifically mentioned in order of frequency:

- sentence errors (run-ons, fragments, comma splices)
- spelling: "It bugs me when folks fail to run a spelling checker."
- subject-verb agreement errors
- wrong words: affect-effect; criterion-criteria; datum-data; less-fewer
- tense and point-of-view or number shifts
- paragraphing: "Not starting a new point with a new paragraph but rambling on in one long paragraph."
- capitalization errors
- poor vocabulary
- lack of parallelism
- awkward constructions
- dangling modifiers and mixed metaphors (from an English professor)

6. Appropriate Documentation

While this issue came up, professors did not consider it as important as the others.

Problems

- Inadequate documentation (plagiarism)
- Inconsistent form

What is most interesting in reviewing these responses is that these professors from a wide range of disciplines (excluding the hard sciences, which are not offered at CGS) sound like writing teachers. Their advice is strikingly similar to Maxine Hairston's definition of good writing, based on research in composition and rhetoric, which she discusses in her textbook, Successful Writing: "Good writing is writing that succeeds in saying something worthwhile to a specific audience for some purpose." It must be:

substantive grammatically acceptable
clear vigorous, and

unified in an authentic voice.
economical

While we had expected to learn from these graduate faculty members addressing students in their fields what the particular characteristics of writing are for each discipline, we were surprised, and eventually a little bored, to hear professor after professor recite Hairston's (and our) litany. One of my note-taking consultants complained, "They all keep saying the same thing!" At a recent Writing Roundtable we held for faculty members, I asked several, who were reviewing the notes from the Talking about Writing workshops, why they had not discussed discipline-specific requirements for their fields. A Politics and Policy professor answered that is not where his students' problems lie. The others agreed. He proceeded to ask me for a "template" to give his students on the basic characteristics of good writing such as those mentioned by his colleagues so that his students could refer to it as they write and he could evaluate their papers accordingly.

How have these workshops affected the way we do our basic consulting work? They have given us confidence that we do know what we are doing and that an English consultant can effectively tutor an Economics student, although we try to match up consultants and students in similar fields whenever possible. It has been worthwhile for the consultants to hear firsthand what professors in other disciplines value, both in these workshops and at our staff meetings. Because of these face-to-face connections, we have been able to consult informally with them when we have questions about assignments or discipline-specific expectations. In fact, in Information Science, we have developed a mini-curriculum to prepare international students for timed Ph.D. qualifying exams. Overall, professors who participate in these workshops are more supportive and aware of us and our mission, and we are more in tune with theirs.

Where do we go from here? We have repeated these workshops in some departments, but we are interested in trying new formats that will not be too cumbersome for the presenters. This year we are offering workshops in several programs on more specialized topics. Professors are explaining how to write conference papers or how to publish articles in their fields. In

Information Science I will be moderating a workshop this spring with four faculty members explaining how to write academic papers and journal articles as well as reports and proposals for professional clients. As we focus on these more specialized forms, I expect we will get more discipline-specific information. In a recent Religion workshop, for instance, professors advised students which journals to try to publish in first and what their typical article lengths are. Still, much more of the conversation had to do with basic good writing skills: remember your audience; fit the purpose, style, length, and documentation form to that particular audience; and get to the point.

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